

Reminiscences of James Whitcomb Riley

By Albert F. Philips*

IT is almost forty years since there appeared in the columns of the Kokomo, Indiana, Tribune a poem under the caption of "Tom Johnson's Quit." Its author was given as John C. Walker. The poem was a stirring temperance lecture and the story was brought out in view that the Blue Ribboners were then making a battle against the liquor evil. The poem at once attracted attention in the

literary world. The poem read:
 "A passel of us boys last night—
 And me amongst 'em—kind o' got
 To talking Temer'nce left and right,
 An' workin' up "Blue-ribbon" hot;
 And while we was a-countin' jes
 How many had gone into hit,
 And signed the pledge, some feller says—
 "Jom Johnson's quit."

We laughed, of course—'cause Tom, you know,
 Has spilled more whisky, boy an' man,
 And seed more trouble, high an' low,
 Than any chap but Tom could stand;
 An' so say I, 'He's too nigh dead
 For Temer'nce to benefit'.
 The feller sighed agin, and said—
 "Tom Johnson's quit."

We all liked Tom, and that was why
 We sort o' simmered down ag'in
 An' ast the feller ser'osly
 Ef he wan't tryin' to draw us in—
 He shuck his head—tuck off his hat—
 Helt up his hand an' opened hit
 An' says, says he, I'll swear to that—
 "Tom Johnson's quit."

Well we was stumpt, and tickled too,
 Because we knew ef Tom had signed
 Thar wan't no man as wore the 'blue'
 As was more honeste inclined;
 An' then an' thar we kindo riz—
 The hull dern gang of us, 'at hit—
 An' th'owed our hats and let 'er whizz
 "Tom Johnson's quit."

I've heard 'em holler when the balls
 Was buzzin' 'round us wus'n bees,
 An' when the old flag on the walls
 Was flappin' o'er the enemy's;
 I've heard a-many a wild "hooray"
 As made my heart git up an' git
 But Lord!—to hear 'em shout that way—
 "Tom Johnson's quit."

But when we saw the chap as fetched
 The news wan't jinin' in the cheer,
 But stood solemn-like, an' reched
 An' kindo wiped away a tear,
 We someway sorto stilled again,
 An' listened—I can hear him yit—
 His voice a—wobblin' with his chin—
 "Tom Johnson's quit."

"I hain't a-givin' you no game—
 I wisht I was! An hour ago,
 This operator—what's his name—
 The one as works at night, you know?
 Went out to flag that ten express,
 An' sees a man in front of hit
 Th'ow up his hands and stagger—yes:
 Tom Johnson's quit."

It was a most forceful story and the author who was an unknown jumped into fame for it made a great hit. The man who wrote the poem had been an itinerant sign painter. His fanciful designs, his grotesque lettering painted in all the variegated colors of the rainbow were all in perfect harmony of

coloring. This sign painter had enacted the role of a blind man gifted with wonderful powers in welding the brush of an artist. He had been an actor with a strolling band of thespians. He was a mimic that few could equal, none excel. He was of the masses, the common people, a born poet. His pure english compositions in both verse and prose have been read by millions throughout the world. He stepped from the lowly in a day and became famous. He had written a poem before that that had been credited to one of the gifted

poets of the world and which was declared by many of the best literary critics in the United States to be the product of the famous poet cited but which the author declined to acknowledge as his own until later years until he had reached the acme among men of letters. The author of "Tom Johnson's Quit" was the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley.

This is recalled in view that today is the 64th anniversary of Mr. Riley's birth and in many places throughout the country exercises are held in his honor. The writer of this story printed many of the early poems of the famous author but they were printed under a nom de plum as Riley always had a desire to mystify and buried his productions under another name. Afterwards he acknowledged them by collecting them and publishing under his own name.

His desire to mystify is shown in the publication by the writer in the Kokomo Tribune of "This Man Jones" over the signature of John C. Walker and the "Ballad of Smiles and Tears" over the signature of Mr. Riley and Lee O. Harris, a townsman of Riley, in the same issue. In a letter to the writer enclosing the poem of "This Man Jones" Mr. Riley says:

"Worked till two last night to get "This Man Jones" in shape to put before the public. And now, I want you by all means, to publish this Walker poem in conjunction with our ballad, you understand. It will do much to bewilder the ones so certain that Walker and Riley are one and the same. "This Man Jones" has a taking title (yes I'll confess that I know that) and I'm almost certain it will prove a greater hit than "Tom Johnson." I just think "This Man Jones" is lovely. You might say in conjunction with the appearance of the joint poem that Mr. Riely will from this time on contribute to your columns, etc.,—anything that will serve to mystify them on the Walker business—'cause when we get ready to let 'em know who Walker is will be time enough. Don't cease to love me and believe in me, for surely if there is a God I will find anchor soon."

Some of the earlier poems of Mr. Riley were written under the name of Lige Rocky, but he did not like the name and then changed his title to John C. Walker and afterwards acknowledged all of them as his own and embodied them in his several books. Here are fac similies of three of Mr. Riley's poems written under his three signatures they show how varied were his themes, they were written thirty-eight years ago.

Among the early poems of Mr. Riley was one entitled "The Best Little By God Man in Town." It was never printed and the writer gave the manuscript years ago to the wife of a well known Missouri newspaper man, who

was a great admirer of Mr. Riley, and who now has it.

One of Riley's poems written on his 26th birthday was "The Little Town O' Tallholt," and printed by the writer a few days later. The first and last stanzas follow:

THE SUMMERTIME.

O the summertime to-day
 Makes my words
 Jes' flip up and fly away
 Like the birds!
 'Janit we use to try to sing,
 With y'r language on the ring,
 Jes' too glad for anything
 But to stray
 Where it may
 Thus the sunny summer weather of the day!

Lindy! what a summertime
 For to sing!
 But my words flop out o' rhyme,
 And they ring
 Funder yit bright the view
 Than the swallows ever flew,
 Es a mortal wanted to—
 'Lies his eye
 Struck the sky
 Es he kinds' sorts thought wid like to fly.
 Ef I could sing—sweet and low,
 And my tongue
 Could thro' it, don't you know,—
 Es I sing
 Of the summertime, 'y Tinge!
 All the words and birds and things
 That kin warble, and less wings,
 Would jes' soar
 And declare!
 That they never heard sich singin' anywhere!
 John C. Walker.